No. 10
The Doom

The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

The mysterious disappearance of Mme. Koluchy was now the general topic of conversation. Her house was deserted, her numerous satellites were not to be found. The womn herself had gone as if it were from the face of the earth. Nearly every detective in London was engaged in her pursuit. Scotland yard had never been more agog with excitement; but day after day passed, and there was not the most remote tidings of her capture.

A few days before Christmas I had a visit from Dufrayer. He found me pacing up and down my laboratory.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"The old story." I answered.

He shook his head.

"This won't do Norman; you must turn your attention to something else."

"That is impossible," I replied, raising haggard eyes to his.

He came up to me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"You want change, Head, and you must have it. I have come in the nick of time with an invitation which ought to suit us both. We have been asked down to Rokesby rectory to spend Christmas with my old friend, the rector. You have often heard me speak of William Sherwood. He is one of the best fellows I know. Shall I accept the invitation for both of us?"

"Where is Rokesby rectory?" I asked.

"In Cumberland, about thirty miles from Lake Windermere, a most picturesque quarter. We shall have as much seclusion as we like at Sherwood's house and the air is bracing. If we run down next Monday we shall be in time for a merry Christmas. What do you say?"

I agreed to accompany Dufrayer, and the following Monday, at an early hour we started on our journey. Nothing of any moment occurred except that at one of the large junctions a party of gypsies got into a third-class compartment near our own. Amongst them I noticed one woman, taller than the rest, who wore a shawl so arranged over her head as to conceal her face. The unusual sight of gypsies traveling by train attracted my attention, and I remarked on it to Dufrayer. Later on, I noticed too, that they were singing, and that one voice was clear, and full, and rich.

At Rokesby station the gypsies left the train, and each of them carried his or her bundle, disappearing almost immediately into a thick pine forest, which stretched away to the left of the little station.

The peculiar gait of the tall woman attracted me, and I was about to mention it to Dufrayer, when Sherwood's sudden appearance and hurried, hospitable greeting put it out of my head.

The vicarage was six miles from the nearest station, but to drive through the bracing air was invigorating.

When we reached the house we saw a slenderly made girl standing on the porch. She held a lamp in her hand, and its bright light illuminated each feature. She had dark eyes and a pale, somewhat nervous face; she could not have been more than 18 years of age.

"Heere we are, Rosaly," called out her father, "and cold, too, after our journey. I hope you have seen to the fires."

"Yes, father; the house is warm and comfortable," was the reply.

The girl stepped onto the gravel, and held out her hand to Dufrayer, who was an old friend. Dufrayer turned and introduced me.

"Mr. Head, Rosaly," he said; "you have often heard me speak of him."

"Many times," she answered. "How do you Mr. Head? I am very glad indeed to welcome you here—you seem quite like an old friend; but come in both of you, do—you must be frozen."

She led the way into the house, and we found ourselves in a spacious and very lofty hall.

"Ah! you are noticing our hall," said the girl, observing the interest in my face. "It is quite one of the features of Rokesby; but the fact is, this is quite an old house, and was not turned into a rectory until the beginning of the present century. I will take you all over it tomorrow. Now, do come into father's smoking room—I have had tea prepared there for you."

She turned to the left, threw open a heavy oak door and introduced us into a room lined with cedar from floor to ceiling. Great logs were burning on the hearth, and tea had been prepared. Miss Sherwood attended to our comforts and presently left us to enjoy our smoke.

When she had gone the rector looked after her with affectionate eyes.

"What a charming girl," I could not help saying.

"I am glad you take to her, Mr. Head," was his reply; "I need not say that she is the light of my old eyes. Rosaly's mother died a fortnight after her birth, and the child has been my one ewe lamb. But I am sorry to say she is sadly delicate, and I have had many years of anxiety about her."

"Indeed," I replied; "it is true she looks pale, but I should have judged that she was healthy—rather of the wiry make."

"In body she is fairly healthy, but hers is a peculiarly nervous organism. She suffers intensely with all sorts of terrors, and her environment is not the best for her. She had a shock when young. I will tell you about it later on."

Soon afterwards Dufrayer and I went to our respective rooms, and when we met in the drawing room half an hour later, Miss Sherwood, in a pretty dress, was standing by the hearth. Her manners were very simple and unaffected, and, although thoroughly girlish, were not wanting in dignity. She was evidently well accustomed to receiving her father's guests, and also to making them thoroughly at home. When we entered the dining room we were already in a brisk conversation, and her young voice and soft, dark-brown eyes added much to the attractivness of the pleasant scene.

Towards the end of the meal I alluded once more to the old house.

"I suppose it is very old," I said, "it has certainly taken me by surprise—you must tell me its history."

I looked full at my young hostess as I spoke. To my surprise a shadow immediately flitted over her expressive face; she hesitated and then said slowly:

"Every one remarks the house, and little wonder. I believe in parts it is over three hundred years old. Of course some of the rooms are modern. Father thinks we were in great luck when it was turned into a rectory, but——" Here she dropped her voice, and a faint sigh escaped her lips.

I looked at her again with curiosity.

"The place was spoiled by the last rector," she went on. "He and his family committed so many acts of vandalism, but father has done his best to restore the house to its ancient appearance. You shall see it tomorrow, if you are really interested."

"I take deep intesest in old houses," I answered; "and this, from the little I have seen of it, is quite to my mind. Doubtless you have many old legends in connection with it, and if you have a real ghost it will complete the charm."

I smiled as I spoke, but the next instant the smile died on my lips. A sudden flame of color had rushed into Miss Sherwood's face, leaving it far paler than was natural. She dropped her napkin, and stooped to pick it up. As she did so, I observed that the rector was looking at her anxiously. He immediately burst into conversation, completely turning the subject into what I considered a trivial channel.

A few minutes later the young girl rose and left us to our wine.

As soon as we were alone, Sherwood asked us to draw our chairs to the fire and began to speak.

"I heard what you said to Rosaly, Mr. Head," he began; "and I am sorry now that I did not warn you. There is a painful legend connected with this old house, and the ghost whom you so laughingly alluded to exists, as far as my child is concerned, to a painful degree."

"Indeed," I answered.

"I don't believe in the ghost myself," he continued; "but I do believe in the influence of a very strong, nervous terror over Rosaly. If you like, I will tell you the story."

"Nothing could please me better," I answered.

The rector opened a fresh box of cigars, handed them to us, and began:

"The man who was my predecessor here had a scapegrace son, who got into serious trouble with a peasant girl in this forest. He took the girl to London, and then deserted her. She drowned herself. The boy's father vowed he would never see the lad again, but the mother pleaded for him, and there was a sort of patched-up reconciliation. He came down to spend Christmas in the house, having faithfully promised to turn over a new leaf. There were festivities and high mirth.

"On Christmas night the whole family retired to bed as usual, but soon afterward a scream was heard issuing from the room where the young man slept—the West Room it is called. By the way, it is the one you are to occupy, Dufrayer. The rector rushed into the room and, to his horror and surprise, found the unfortunate young man dead, stabbed to the heart. There was, naturally, great excitement and alarm, more particularly when it was discovered that a well known herb woman, the mother of the girl whom the young man had decoyed to London, had been seen haunting the place. Rumor went so far as to say that she had entered the house by a secret passage known only to herself. Her name was Mother Heriot, and she was regarded by the villagers as a sort of witch. This woman was arrested on suspicion; but nothing was definitely proved against her, and no trial took place. Six weeks later she was found dead in her hut, on Grey Tor, and since then the rumor is that she haunts the rectory on each Christmas night—entering the house through the secret passage, which we none of us can discover. This story is rife in the house, and I suppose Rosaly heard it from her old nurse. Certain it is that, when she was about 8 years old, she was found on Christmas night screaming violently, and declaring that she had seen the herb-woman, who entered her room and bent down over her. Since then her nerves have never been the same. Each Christmas as it comes around is a time of mental terror to her, although she tries hard to struggle against her fears. On her account I shall be glad when Christmas is over. I do my best to make it cheerful, but I can see that she dreads it terribly."

"What about the secret passage?" I interrupted.

"Ah! I have something curious to tell you about that," said the old rector, rising as he spoke. "There is not the least doubt that it exists. It is said to have been made at the time of the Monmouth rebellion, and is supposed to be connected with the churchyard, about 200 yards away; but although we have searched and have even had experts down to look into the matter, we have never been able to get the slightest clue to its whereabouts. My impression is that it was bricked up long ago, and that whoever committed the murder entered the house by some other means. Be that as it may, the passage cannot be found, and we have long ceased to trouble ourselves about it."

"But have you no clue whatever to its whereabouts?" I asked.

"Nothing which I can call a clue. My belief is that we shall have to pull down the old pile before we find the passage."

"I should like to search for it," I said impulsively; "these sort of things interest me immensely."

"I could give you a sort of key, Head, if that would be any use," said Sherwood; "it is in an old black-letter book." As he spoke, crossed the room, took a book bound in vellum, with silver clasps, from a locked bookcase, and, opening it, laid it before me.

"This book contains a history of Rokesby," he continued. "Can you read black-letter?"

I replied that I could.

He then turned a page, and pointed to some rhymed words. "More than one expert has puzzled over these lines," he continued. "Read for yourself."

I read aloud, slowly:

When the Yew and Star combine,
Draw it twenty cubits line;
Wait until the saintly lips
Shall the belfry spire eclipse.
Cubits eight across the first,
There shall lie the tomb accurst.

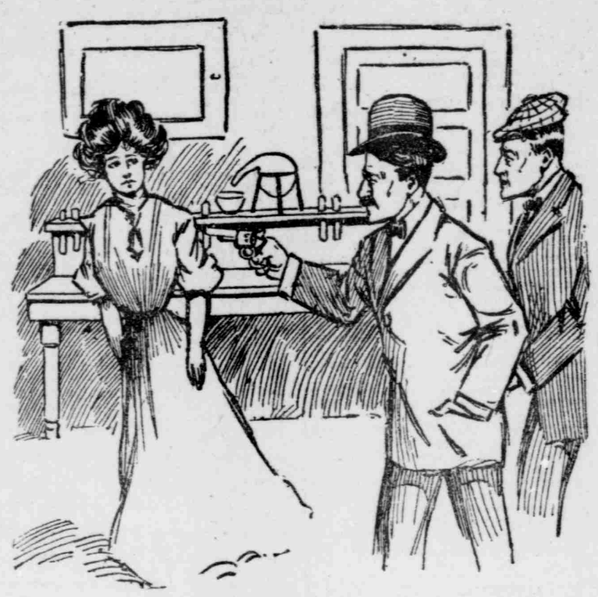
"And you have never succeeded in solving this?" I continued.

"We have often tried, but never with success. The legend runs that the passage goes into the churchyard and has a connection with one of the old vaults, but I know nothing more. Shall we join Rosaly in the drawing room?"

"May I copy this old rhyme first?" I asked.

My host looked at me curiously; then he nodded. I took a memorandum book from my pocket and scribbled down the words. Mr. Sherwood then locked up the book in its accustomed place, and we left the subject of the secret passage and the ghost, to enjoy the rest of the evening in a more everyday manner.

The next morning, Christmas eve, was damp and chill, for a thaw had set in during the night. Miss Sherwood asked Dufrayer and me to help her with the church decorations, and we spent a busy morning in the very old Norman church just at the back of the vicarage. When we left it, on our way home to lunch, I could not help looking round the churchyard with interest. Where was the tomb accurst into which the secret passage ran? As I could not talk, however, on the subject with Miss Sherwood, I resolved, at least for the present, to banish it from my mind. A sense of strong depression was still hanging over me, and Mme.



Koluchy herself seemed to pervade the air.

"The day is brightening," said Rosaly, turning her eyes on my face, as we were entering the house; "suppose we go for a walk after lunch? If you like, we will go up Grey Tor and pay a visit to Mother Heriot."

"Mother Heriot?" I repeated, in astonishment.

"Yes—the herb woman—but do you know about her?"

"Your father spoke about a woman of that name last night."

"Oh, I know," replied Miss Sherwood, hastily; "but he alluded to the mother—the dreadful ghost which is said to haunt Rokesby. This is the daughter. When the mother died, a long time ago, after committing a terrible murder, the daughter took her name and trade. She is a very curious person, and I should like you to see her. She is very much looked up to by the neighbors, although they also fear her. She is said to have a panacea against every sort of illness."

"Does she deal in witchcraft and fortune-teling?" I asked.

"A little of the latter, beyond doubt," replied the girl laughing; "she can tell your fortune this afternoon. What fun it will be!"

Soon after the midday meal we set off taking the road for a mile or two, and then turning sharply to the right, we began ascend Grey Tor. Our path led through a wood of dark pines and larches, which clothed the side of the summit of the hill. The air was still very chilly, and it struck damp as we entered the pine forest.

"Mother Heriot's hut is just beyond the wood," said Rosaly; "you will see is as soon as we emerge. Ah! there it is," she cried.

I looked upward and saw a hut made of stone and mud, which seemed to cling to the bare side of the mountain.

We walked quickly up the winding path, that grew narrower as we proceided. Suddenly we emerged on to a little plateau on the mountain side. It was grass-covered and strewn with gray granite boulders. Here stood the rude hut. From the chimney some smoke was going straight up like a thin blue ribbon. As we approached close we saw that the door of the hut was shut. From the eaves under the roof were hanging several bunches of dried herbs. I stepped forward and struck upon the door with my stick. It was immediately opened by a thin, middle-aged woman, with a singularly lined and withered face. I asked her if we might come in. She gave me a keen glance from out of her beady-black eyes, then, seeing Rosaly, her face brightened; she made a rapid motion with her hand, and then, to my astonishment, began to speak on her fingers.

"She can hear all right, but she is quite dumb—has been so since she was a child," said the rector's daughter to me. "She does not use the ordinary deaf and dumb language, but she taught me her peculiar signs long ago, and I often run up here to have a chat with her."

"Now, look here, mother," continued the girl, going close up to the dame, "I have brought two gentlemen to see you; we want you to tell us our fortunes. It is lucky to have the fortune told on Christmas eve, is it not?"

The herb woman nodded, then pointed inside the hut. She then spoke quickly on her fingers. Rosaly turned to us.

"We are in great luck," said the girl, excitedly. "A curious thing has happened. Mother Heriot has a visitor staying with her, no less a person than the greatest fortune-teller in England, the queen of the gypsies; she is spending a couple of nights in the hut. Moth-Heriot suggests that the queen of the gypsies shall tell our fortunes."

"I wonder if the woman she alludes to is one of the gypsies who arrived at Rokesby station yesterday," I said, turning to Dufrayer.

"Very possibly," he answered, just raising his brows.

Rosaly continued to speak in great excitement.

"You consent, don't you?"

"Certainly," said Dufrayer, with a smile.

"All right, mother," cried Miss Sherwood, turning once more to the herb woman: "we will have our fortunes told and your gypsy friend shall tell them. Will she come out to us here, or shall we go in to her?"

Again there was a quick pantomime of fingers and hands. Rosaly began to interpret.

"Mother Heriot says that she will speak to her first. She seems to stand in considerable awe of her."

The herb woman vanished inside the hut. We continued to stand on the threshold.

I looked at Dufrayer, who gave me an answering glance of amusement. Our position was ridiculous, and yet, ridiculous as it seemed, there was a curiously tense feeling at my heart, and my depression grew greater than ever.

The herb woman returned, and Miss Sherwood eagerly interpreted.

"How queer!" she exclaimed. "The gypsy will only see me alone. I am to meet her in the hut. Shall I go in?"

"I should advise you to have nothing to do with the matter," said Dufrayer.

"Oh, but I am curious. I should like to," she answered.

"Well, we will wait for you; but don't put faith in her silly words."

The girl's face slightly paled. She entered the hut; we remained outside.

"Knowing her peculiar idosyncrasy, I wonder if we did right to let her go in?" I said to my friend.

"Why not?" said Dufrayer.

"With such a disposition she ought not to be indulged in ridiculous superstitions," I said.

"She cannot take such nonsense seriously," was his reply. He was leaning against the lintel of the hut, his arms folded, his eyes looking straight before him.

A moment later Miss Sherwood reappeared. There was a marked, and quite terrible change in her face—it was absolutely white. She avoided our eyes, slipped a piece of silver into Mother Heriot's hand and said meekly:

"Let us hurry home; it is turning very cold."

"Now what is it?" said Dufrayer, as we began to descend the montain; "you look as if you had heard bad news."

"The queen of the gypsies was very mysterious," said the girl.

"What sort of a person was she?" I asked.

"I can not tell you, Mr. Head; I saw very little of her. She was in a dark part of the hut, and was in complete shadow. She took my hand and looked at it, and said what I am not allowed to repeat."

"I am sorry you saw her," I answered, "but surely you don't believe her? You are too much a girl of the latter end of the nineteenth century to place your faith in fortune-tellers."

"But that is just it," she answered. "I am not a girl of the nineteenth century at all, and I do most fully believe in fortune-telling and all kinds of superstitions. I wish we hadn't gone. What I have heard does affect me strangely, strangely. I wish we had not gone."

We were now descending the hill, but as we walked Miss Sherwood kept glancing behind her as if afraid of some one or something following us. Suddenly she stopped, turned around and clutched my arm.

"Hark! Who is that?" she whispered, pointing her hand toward a dark shadow beneath the trees.

"There is some one coming after us. I am certain there is. Don't you see a figure behind that clump? Who can it be? Listen."

We waited and stood silent for a moment, gazing toward the spot which the girl had indicated. The sharp snap of a dead twig followed by the rustling noise of rapidly retreating footsteps sounded thorugh the stillness. I felt Miss Sherwood's hand tremble on my arm.

"There certainly was someone," said Dufrayer; "but why should there not be?"

"Why, indeed," I echoed. "There is nothing to be frightened about, Miss Sherwood. It is doubtless one of Mother Heriot's bucolic patients."

"They never venture near her at this hour," she answered. "They believe in her, but they are also a good deal afraid. No one ever goes to see Mother Heriot after dark. Let us get quickly home."

I could see that she was much troubled, and thought it best to humor her. We hurried forward. Just as we entered the pine wood I looked back. On the summit of the little ridge which contained Mother Heriot's hut I saw dimly through the mist a tall figure. The moment my eyes rested on it it vanished. There was something in its height and gait which made my heart stand still. It resembled the tall gypsy whom I had noticed yesterday, and it also bore—God in heaven, yes—an intangible and yet very real resemblance to Mme. Koluchy. Mme. Koluchy here! Impossible! My brain must be playing me tricks. I laughed at my own nervousness. Surely here at least we were safe from that woman's machinations.

We reached home, and I mentioned my vague suspicion to Dufrayer.

"A wild idea has occurred to me," I said.

"What?" he answered.

"It flashed through my brain that there is just a remote possibility that the gypsy fortune-teller in Mother Heriot's hut is madame herself."

He looked thoughtfully for a moment.

"We can never tell where and how madame may reappear," he said; "but I think in this case, Head, you may banish the suspicion from your mind. Beyond doubt, the woman has left England long ago."

The evening passed away. I noticed that Rosaly was silent and preoccupied; her nervousness was now quite apparent to every one, and her father, who could not but remark of it, was especially tender to her.

Christmas day went by quietly. In the morning we all attended service in the little church, and at night some guests arrived for the usual festivities. We passed a merry evening, but now and then I glanced with a certain apprehension at Miss Sherwood. She was in white, with holly berries in her belt and dark hair. She was certainly a pretty girl, but the uneasiness plainly manifested in her watchful eyes and trembling lips marred her beauty. There was a want of quiet about her, too, which infected me uncomfortably. Suddenly I determined to ask her confidence. What had the mysterious gypsy said to her? This was the night when, according to the old tradition, the ghost of the herb woman appeared. If Miss Sherwood should relieve her mind before retiring to rest, it would be all the better for her. We were standing near each other, and as she stooped to pick up a bunch of berries which had fallen from her belt, I bent toward her.

"You are troubled about something," I said.

"Oh, I am a very silly girl," she replied.

"Will you not tell me about it?" I continued. "I will respect your confidence, and give you my sympathy."

"I ought not to encourage my nervous fears," she replied. "By the way, did father tell you about the legend connected with this house?"

"He did."

"This is the night when the herb woman appears."

"My dear child, you don't suppose that a spirit from the other world really comes back in that fashion! Dismiss it from your mind—there is nothing in it."

"So you say," she answered, "but you never saw—" She began to tremble, and raising her hand brushed it across hey eyes. "I feel a ghostly influence in the air," she said; "I know that something dreadful will happen tonight."

"You think that, because the fortune-teller frightened you yesterday."

She gave me a startled and wide-awake glance.

"What do you mean?"

"I judge from your face and manner. If you will take courage and unburden your mind, I may, doubtless, be able to dispel your fears."

"But she told me what she did under the promise of secrecy; dare I break my word?"

"Under the circumstances, yes," I answered quickly.

"Very well, I will tell you. I don't feel as if I could keep it to myself another moment. But you on your part must faithfully promise that it shall go no farther."

"I will make the promise," I said.

She looked me full in the face.

"Come into the conservatory," she said. She took my hand, and led me out of the long, low drawing room into a great conservatory at the farther end. It was lit with many Chinese lanterns, which gave a dim, and yet bright, effect. We went and stood under a large lemon tree, and Miss Sherwood took one of my hands in both her own.

"I shall never forget that scene yesterday," she said. "I could scarcely see the face of the gypsy, but her great, brilliant eyes pierced the gloom, and the feel of her hand thrilled me when it touched mine. She asked me to kneel by her, and her voice was very full and